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# Horses as key informants? A consideration of including animals as ethnographic partners

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In this paper, I explore the idea of using an animal as an ethnographic partner (or possibly a key informant?) through reflecting on my experience of conducting the first of four ethnographic studies where I was based in equine livery yards (ie rented stabling and exercise facilities for horses) in Scotland. The aim of the research was to investigate the factors that contribute to a 'healthy' livery yard experience for both horses and humans and so, in order to experience livery yard "life" as fully as possible, I positioned myself in the role of "participant as observer" (Gold, 1958) by stabling a horse at the yard in question. This was designed to offer a deep insight into all aspects of the yard, including the horse care, the culture, the training philosophies and the interpersonal relationships between the actors (human and equine) in the yard.

Here I examine the prior preparation that I undertook in order to maximise the "success" of my ethnographic interlude. This included, firstly, buying the "right" horse in order to allow me to fit into the yard in a way that would be non-threatening to other yard clients; secondly, ascertaining that the facilities at the yard would be suitable for my horse's requirements; thirdly, beginning to build a relationship with the yard owner in order to make the transition for my horse and myself as smooth as possible and finally customising the equine accommodation so that my horse would be comfortable.

Consequently, in my mind, I had examined all aspects of the situation with horse wellbeing as the guiding principle and I felt that I was caring for my horse (Zorca) as effectively as possible in a livery yard setting. Thus I believed that I was behaving entirely ethically with regard to her care. However, I had not adequately conceptualised that the setting would impact on her in a way that appeared to me to be very negative and that she might have an opinion about the life she was living. As a result, despite my best efforts, I had to remove her from the yard within a week of arriving for reasons of her physical and emotional health. Subsequently, I made the decision to place a different horse (Thriller) at the yard (I perceived that he might be more robust emotionally) but again, within a short period, he had to return home.

This paper considers the ethical, emotional and practical aspects of involving animals in ethnography and discusses the insights and findings that emerged from the period spent at the livery yard with Zorca and Thriller.